

VZCZCXRO1858

OO RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV
DE RUEHSF #0224/01 0511039

ZNY SSSSS ZZH

O 201039Z FEB 07

FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3251

INFO RHMFIS/HQ USEUCOM IMMEDIATE

RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUENAAA/SECNAV WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000224

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DEPT. FOR EUR/NCE, EUR/RPM, PM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [TU](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: BULGARIA: MFA TAKES HARD LINE ON BLACK SEA HARMONY

REF: SOFIA 87

Classified By: Amb. John Beyrle, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: In a February 14 meeting, MFA Regional Security chief (and resident Black Sea expert) Dimitar Dimitrov briefed us on the GoB's emerging Black Sea strategy. He expressed hardening resistance to Bulgarian membership in Operation Black Sea Harmony (OBSH), and allowed poloff to review a draft proposal for an alternate security framework -- dubbed the "Synergy Concept" -- that Bulgaria plans to present to other littoral states in March. In the long term, the GoB still wants to see something similar to Operation Active Endeavor on the Black Sea. Their modest "synergy" proposal is intended to be a small step toward that desired end state and an alternative to OBSH, which they increasingly see as a dead end. END SUMMARY.

Black Sea Harmony

¶12. (S) Dimitrov made it clear that the MFA sees "no benefit" in Bulgarian membership in Operation Black Sea Harmony. As reported in reftel, the GoB as a whole is unenthusiastic about OBSH, with only civilian MoD officials viewing the operation as benign, if not particularly useful. Dimitrov said that, faced with a near-total inability to justify OBSH in terms of the Bulgarian national interest, his colleagues at the MoD's International Cooperation Directorate had been ordered by Deputy Defense Minister Yankulova to "invent something" in an effort to make nice with the Americans. Speaking informally, Dimitrov said the MFA understands that U.S. support for OBSH is part of a "multifaceted" U.S.-Turkish relationship, but that did not mean that Bulgaria would sign on to an agreement that it sees as against its national interests.

¶13. (S) For the MFA's part, Dimitrov took issue with the suggestion that OBSH was a "NATO-affiliated" operation, and derided its supposed operational utility. OBSH would do nothing to build trust or capabilities, he said; all it would accomplish would be to grant Turkey a monopoly over information flows and encourage Turkish/Russian condominium as a bulwark against increased NATO engagement in the Caucasus and Black Sea. Dimitrov also argued that U.S. suspicion of BLACKSEAFOR is misplaced. Since BLACKSEAFOR operates by consensus, he said, Russia and Turkey cannot dominate it as they can Black Sea Harmony, which is at its core a national operation. According to Dimitrov, consultations with Romanian counterparts have revealed a

similar suspicion of Turkish motives. Allegedly, when Romanian naval officers expressed regret to Turkish counterparts on their lack of operational capability, the Turks responded that they didn't need Romania's capability -- they just needed them to sign.

¶4. (S) The MFA and General Staff have offered us detailed arguments as to why the advertised operational benefits of OBSH are unlikely to materialize. To begin with, Bulgaria already shares all the coastal surveillance information it has directly from its Burgas Center to CC-MAR Naples. Bulgarian membership in OBSH would not translate into increased data flows to NATO, nor would it expand Bulgaria's access to other countries' data -- OBSH calls for information to be sent from each littoral state to Turkey (and shared monthly with NATO) but does not provide a mechanism for information from, e.g., Romania to be regularly shared with Bulgaria. Who, Dimitrov asked rhetorically, could stop Turkey if it decided to give Russia information reported by Bulgaria or Romania? He also made the point that with or without OBSH, the Black Sea is divided into discrete national areas of responsibility, and that OBSH would do nothing to encourage joint operations or operational coordination. The GoB believes that, bared of rhetoric, OBSH membership will mean two things: political acquiescence to Russian/Turkish domination of the Black Sea and Turkish monopolization of Black Sea operational intelligence -- neither one an acceptable prospect for Bulgaria.

Bulgaria's proposal: expanded Black Sea info exchange

¶5. (S) Pressed to offer something other than kvetching about

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Turkey, Dimitrov (protect) agreed to preview Bulgaria's counterproposal, "something that only 4 or 5 people in the government have seen." This proposal -- dubbed the "synergy project" -- seeks to vastly expand transparency and information exchange in the Black Sea. In meetings with other littoral states in March, the Bulgarians plan to propose that:

- All littoral states channel suspect vessel information through Bulgaria's Burgas center, whereupon it will be made immediately available to all other littoral states;
- Littoral states agree that information can be exchanged on "suspect vessels" as such without the need for protocols on exchange of classified information, and;
- Information gathered by the Burgas Center be shared with CC-MAR, AIS, VITMISS, SafeSeaNet, Piraeus, Frontex, MSSIS, SECI, and VRTMC.

Note: This proposal expands on the "Agreement on Cooperation Among the Border/Coast Guard Authorities of the Black Sea Littoral States" -- one of the few Black Sea regional agreements which has the support of all littoral states. The agreement was signed by five of the six Black Sea countries on 9 Nov 2006 (Romania did not sign for technical reasons).

Comment:

¶6. (S) The "synergy project" is still in the idea stage; it does not have any formal blessing from the government, and even if it had, its acceptance by all littoral states is far from assured. We pass it along, in advance of ADM Ulrich's visit, as a preview of one direction the OSH discussions here might take. By taking an apolitical, pragmatic approach and emphasizing a "coast guard" rather than naval approach to Black Sea maritime security, Bulgaria's proposal aims to sidestep the geo-strategic impasse over Black Sea Harmony, while showing a way forward that will allow for maximum exchange of operational information. Stripped of any political pretensions, the "synergy" project as described to us is in no way incompatible with eventual Bulgarian

cooperation with OSHB or future NATO engagement in the Black Sea. If implemented, it could help build sorely-needed trust between Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey that will eventually pave the way for more robust NATO engagement in the Black Sea. END COMMENT.

BEYRLE